

The Need for NMCI

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BACKGROUND

The Navy Marine Corps Intranet (NMCI) service contract was awarded on 6 October 2000 to Electronic Data Systems Corporation (EDS), making NMCI the largest computer network in the world. Under the NMCI service contract, "The service provider shall own and maintain all required desktop and network hardware and software, and provide all required IT services, including pier connectivity."¹ Conceptually speaking, the NMCI contract was intended to centralize support so that Marines could focus on "taking the fight to the enemy." However, the Marine Corps needs to evaluate the option to modify and renew the NMCI contract since it will be hard-pressed to provide the manpower and the resources necessary to manage an enterprise-wide network.

Although NMCI's customer satisfaction surveys show increasing satisfaction rates among its users, many respondents found the system to be too restrictive in its early stages.² These same users look forward to the current EDS contract expiring in 2010 so that they can compute on a less restrictive network.

¹ Department of the Navy Program Executive Officer for Information Technology (PEO-IT), "NMCI Contract N00024-00-D-6000," (2000): 2.

² US Fed News Service, Including US State News, "Survey Shows NMCI Customer Satisfaction Continues Upward Trend." February 8, 2008, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

LACK OF RESOURCES

The network is managed from a centralized perspective, divided over several regions. The Marine Corps does not have plans to renew its contract with EDS. Instead, it plans to allow the contract to expire and then transition to the Next Generation Enterprise Network (NGEN). The exact details on what NGEN will entail are still pending announcement.³ But many people speculate that limited administrator permissions will be granted to S-6 personnel at the battalion and squadron level. If this is the case, the hope is that NGEN will provide a less restrictive and a more permissive computing environment.⁴

Furthermore, the current NMCI contract calls for EDS to provide continuous on-call support that can fix the most common problems that users face. All users are supposed to call a central help desk whenever they experience technical issues. Help desk technicians try to fix a problem over the phone. If the computer problem still cannot be solved by the technicians on the telephone, a customer service representative (CSR) or network technician is assigned the trouble ticket and should respond in person within a day or two.

³ Brian Robinson, "Life After NMCI," Federal Computer Week, September 10, 2007, 20.

⁴ Geoff Fein, "Ensuring Continuity of Service Is Prime In Transition to NGEN," Defense Daily 240, no. 1 (2008): 6.

This last level of escalation to CSRs or network technicians provides face-to-face interaction as necessary and indicates to users how their trouble tickets are being handled with a sense of urgency. NMCI provides a dedicated staff whose sole responsibility is to help the end user. The help-desk carefully annotates what problems a user is experiencing and what actions have been taken thus far to correct the issue so that a CSR does not duplicate efforts to fix a problem.

If the Marine Corps were to do away with contracting its computer support to outside sources, the support would fall solely on the shoulders of the communications Marines. The Marine Corps has to consider if Marines are postured to take over an enterprise network. Marines devote minimal effort towards providing garrison communications support since it is NMCI's responsibility.

Restructuring Marine Corps garrison communications support will not be an easy accomplishment. If the Marines had to assume the role of network administrators without proper training, a disparity in the quality of customer service among different units would occur, depending on their computer and network experience. Such a disparity could have a negative impact on less fortunate units throughout the Marine Corps. Users could be faced with greater service unavailability due to administrators not having as much knowledge as their peers or

the NMCI counterparts that they replace. In turn, leaders and planners may find themselves restrained in what they are able to accomplish when a network or computer system is unavailable due to technical complications.

THE COST OF ANOTHER TRANSITION

The current NMCI contract allows EDS to maintain sole custody of their network diagram and all equipment tied to it. What does this mean to the Marine Corps? It means that although it may take over the network and gain administrator privileges, it won't necessarily know how the network is laid out.⁵ This is very similar to not having the blueprints to a house but wanting to do maintenance and renovations. It would be a time consuming process for the Marines to map their network through trial and error.

Marines would undoubtedly figure out how to get the desired results, but it may take them hours or days to reach their goal. Over the years, NMCI has dealt with network trouble tickets that took multiple days to resolve. Furthermore, NMCI resolved these trouble tickets with their network diagrams and blueprints in hand. Either the Marine Corps could attempt to figure out how the network is laid out and configured through trial and error,

⁵ Brian Robinson, "Life After NMCI," Federal Computer Week, September 10, 2007, 20.

or it could purchase rights to the infrastructure layout.⁶ EDS only needs to name their price and the Marine Corps needs to agree to it. If the Marine Corps renewed its contract with EDS, mapping the network or buying schematics for the network would be a moot point.

TOO MANY TRAINING REQUIREMENTS

The Marine Corps' pride on maintaining the highest training standards requires mandatory training to be completed throughout the year. As more requirements are added to the training standards, Marines have less time to accomplish the task at hand. Yet the Marines want to be well prepared and ready to respond at any moment's notice.

But how can communications Marines be expected to complete their training when more requirements are added on and none are taken away? As time progresses, the Marine Corps will find itself increasingly reliant on information technology (IT) based tools for planning and executing missions. The IT and computer equipment being utilized by communications Marines is constantly being changed and replaced with updated hardware. These Marines will be expected to be technically proficient and savvy on a wide variety of equipment while completing their training

⁶ Department of the Navy Program Executive Officer for Information Technology (PEO-IT), "NMCI Contract N00024-00-D-6000," (2000): 172.

requirements. Personnel will likely feel the strain of being over-tasked due to an ever-increasing workload and increased training requirements.

IMMEDIATE ON-SITE SUPPORT

Granted, it is fair to say that NMCI does have some constraints associated with it. Many senior leaders, dissatisfied with NMCI's services, wish more than anything to have control of "their" network.⁷ Whether a request is submitted to install software on a computer or update user profile properties, Marines can expect the turnaround time to take two or three days through the NMCI contract. These requests are different from technical trouble-calls and generally have a longer waiting time associated with them.

Sometimes a commander or other personnel feel more satisfied when they can walk down the hall and tap an S-6 technician on the shoulder to work on a computer. If Marines maintain the network after the NMCI contract expires, they could simply troubleshoot the problem immediately for a trouble-call instead of having to wait a couple of days. Those customers would tend to feel like their needs are addressed immediately as opposed to a few days later.

⁷ Geoff Fein, "Next NMCI Contract Will Need Flexibility to Pace Technology Changes," Defense Daily 235, no. 21 (2007): 2.

THE NEED FOR FLEXIBILITY

Sometimes, Marines are restricted from submitting requests to NMCI because of the cost associated with making changes to hardware or software. Under the current contract, NMCI usually charges the Marine Corps for each change request submitted.⁸ Additionally, NMCI does not provide the same flexible support as provided by S-6 Marines. Senior leaders can reminisce about an age, not too long ago, when their S-6 shops could install computers on a network with relative ease in only a couple of days.

Long gone are the days where a Marine can return from deployment and point to a wall port to which he'd like to have his computer connected. NMCI requires a user to identify the desired wall port and to submit a request stating where a computer needs to be installed. Hasty changes are no longer acceptable under the NMCI contract, unless one is willing to pay again, and the request can take anywhere from two to four days to be completed if there are not any errors on the request.⁹ Throughout the Marine Corps, NMCI seems too restricted by frivolous costs. Marines feel that the contract is

⁸ Department of the Navy Program Executive Officer for Information Technology (PEO-IT), "NMCI Contract N00024-00-D-6000," (2000).

⁹ Department of the Navy Program Executive Officer for Information Technology (PEO-IT), "NMCI Contract N00024-00-D-6000," (2000).

counterproductive to their expeditionary nature. The Marine Corps is looking for a robust network that provides an expeditionary capability.¹⁰

CONTRACTOR SUPPORT

Although there are some readily identifiable benefits and merits to doing away with NMCI, some viable consequences exist if the Marine Corps decides to go down that route. Granted, requests may be more rapidly handled and acted upon by Marines, but at what cost? Senior leaders must consider that with a finite number of resources, they cannot be strong everywhere.

The communications force will likely feel a strain at some point along the support spectrum. NMCI offers dedicated personnel whose sole responsibility is to ensure the maintenance, readiness, and availability of an enterprise network. Those people are not as burdened with increasing training requirements as the Marines are burdened.

NMCI, although sometimes slow to send a representative to work on a problem, documents trouble tickets to state what work has been done on a computer or network hardware in order to reduce redundancy of work. Additionally, Marines are constantly focused on meeting mandatory training requirements. If Marines

¹⁰ Matt Hilburn, "NMCI in a Box," Sea Power, July 1, 2008, 26.

manage the network, redundant work will undoubtedly be done on trouble tickets while Marines rotate in and out of communications shops as the training schedule dictates.

MODIFY THE CONTRACT OR RETAIN CONTRACTORS

NMCI may not be the exact network solution that the Marine Corps is seeking, but the Making the Marines manage the network isn't the solution either. The Marine Corps needs to closely examine the state of its current network support and determine if they can improve upon its current position with its own organic personnel. A renewal or modification of the current contract is critical to network support in the future.¹¹ The Marine Corps lacks the manpower and resources available to maintain its enterprise network and thus needs contracted personnel to augment the IT work force in the future.

1646 words

¹¹ Brian Robinson, "Life After NMCI," Federal Computer Week, September 10, 2007, 20.